

Choosing a Good Nursery



Choosing a good nursery is a big decision for most parents, but one that often causes great anxiety and raises many questions. The first step that parents might take is to visit a number of nursery settings to be absolutely confident that the one that they have chosen is right for their baby.

Knowing something about the nursery in advance of the visit can be helpful. The good nursery will have a reputation locally and will be known for its friendly approach and welcoming setting. Parents can also check out the following:

- Inspection report - provides information about the quality of care, health and safety and other key issues (www.ofsted.gov.uk).
- Prospectus - gives information about the environment, the facilities, the key worker system, how learning and development are fostered and the nursery's aims.
- Policies - include everything from opening and closing times, admission, staff training, settling in, anti-discriminatory practice, emergencies, accidents and illness to allergies or food intolerances.

If the above systems are in place, parents will see that the nursery takes the responsibility of caring for babies very seriously indeed.

Visiting the nursery

When parents visit the nursery, they may chat to parents who are already there about their experiences and observations. They may also ask the manager and nursery staff questions about a range of issues that are important to them. Practitioners, who listen to their questions and respond with warmth and

sensitivity, give parents the confidence to leave their baby in the care of others. If parents feel that their skills and expertise are valued, a joined up approach to care will be achieved between the setting and the home.

Here are some questions that parents might want to run through with the nursery manager and staff during their visit:

How can I prepare my baby for nursery?

The nursery may provide an information sheet, which explains how parents can prepare their baby for nursery. For example, parents may be reassured to learn that they can stay with their baby during the settling-in process or that they can visit as frequently as they wish until their baby becomes familiar with the setting and new faces. Parents may also feel comforted to learn that they can telephone to find out how their baby has settled.

What do I do if I have any concerns?

If the baby has a dietary, health or medical requirement, the parents will need to share the information with the nursery, so that misunderstandings are avoided. Any information will be treated in the strictest confidence. If the baby exhibits absolute indicators or 'red flags', practitioners may find themselves in the unenviable role of having to discuss their concerns with the parents. However, if the concern is handled in a supportive and non-judgemental way, parents will be more likely to seek professional advice. They will also feel that they can pursue questions or concerns about their baby's development with staff in the future.

Are comforters allowed?

Starting nursery is a key period in the baby's life and an emotional one for the parents. The best nursery will not discourage parents from bringing in the baby's favourite blanket or comforter. Studies show that a comfort object can provide emotional comfort and security for the baby during times of separation, since it is associated with home. However, it is always helpful to have comfort objects labelled with the baby's name or some other form of identification.

Does the nursery close for staff support and training?

Although inconvenient, short-term closure for staff training is essential to ensure that practitioners are supported to meet the physical, social, intellectual and emotional needs of the babies in their care. Training can make practitioners feel more confident in conversing with parents. Likewise, parents appreciate that the staff are well-qualified to meet their baby's needs.

Is there an open-door visitation policy for parents?

An open-door visitation policy usually indicates that the setting is informal and welcoming. Lunchtime visits may be particularly important to breastfeeding mothers that work in the vicinity of the nursery. However, unauthorized visitors should not be able to enter without valid reason. Parents must also inform the nursery if they are going to be late or if their baby is to be collected by a different adult. A contingency plan will ensure that their baby will not leave the premises with an unknown adult.

Is there a rapid staff changeover?

Some change of staff is inevitable in any childcare setting. However, a high turnover may reflect unhappy staff or a lack of support or direction from the nursery manager or employer. Staff turnover often decreases when practitioners know that their skills are valued and that their work makes a real difference to the baby's health and future welfare.

Evidence suggests that regular swapping of carers or constant change-over of staff can prevent an attachment bond developing, which is a risk factor for stress. If stress levels remain elevated throughout the day, areas of the baby's brain involved in memory, attention, behaviour and emotion may be severely affected. Babies need to have a secure and trustworthy relationship with a stable carer who provides emotional security and protection against stress. Studies show that stress levels in babies can double during the first nine days in an unfamiliar setting.

Babies who have not had the opportunity to develop a strong attachment to a calm, nurturing and predictable key worker will initially protest by crying, but may become subdued or withdrawn during the day. Very often, compliant behaviour is seen as acceptance or settling in, but the baby's cortisol levels are often elevated. Some babies will freeze or stiffen without an attachment figure. This type of behaviour may go undetected, which increases their vulnerability to any additional risk factors that they may experience later on.

The baby should have access to a trusted key worker whenever the parent is not available to them. It is especially important that the key worker is emotionally available to the baby if they are experiencing insecurity or stress at home.

What is the check-in procedure?

Even though busy practitioners may have little time to spend with parents during the daily check-in, finding time to talk to them is important and benefits everyone involved. Some nurseries ensure that extra adults are available during check-in or settling in times. Drop off times may also be staggered.

Saying 'Goodbye' to their baby can be a painful experience for both the parents and the baby. However, if the separation is carefully handled by a regular key-worker, the baby's distress will not last long.

Parents may also feel guilty at having to leave their baby, anxious for their welfare or jealous that another person is looking after them. The key-worker can reassure parents that their baby is in good hands and that attachment to a particular carer is a sign of healthy development.

How is information shared?

Daily exchanges of information between parents and practitioners may include how the baby slept that night, what they did at the weekend, whether or not they had a day time nap, activities they enjoyed and other care or developmental issues. Conversations that are open, honest and positive give practitioners the opportunity to share the baby's development and progress with the parents. The sharing of information also enables practitioners to meet the baby's sleep, feeding and other needs more consistently.

Information may also be exchanged in a daily journal, which helps parents to see how their baby is getting on and what they can do to help at home. Parents will feel more involved with their baby when they have information about their activities in the day.

Some nurseries publish a weekly or monthly newsletter or have a bulletin board that provides information about activities and other special events. Most nursery settings have open evenings, open days or informal meetings, which give parents the opportunity to find out about the facilities on offer and to talk to the staff about baby care and the work that they are doing.

The nursery environment

Parents will pick up a variety of important cues during their first visit. The following may be important to them:

- Is the room warm, bright, well-decorated and welcoming?
- Is the room well lit (preferably with natural sunlight) and well ventilated?
- Are the walkways and corridors clean and uncluttered?
- Is the kitchen area spotless?
- Are there separate suitable nappy changing facilities?
- Does the room have a cosy area?
- Do the toys look clean and safe?
- Are they age appropriate and of good quality (see EYE December 2009)?
- Do the babies look happy, interested and relaxed (bear in mind that babies behave differently mid-morning to late afternoon)?
- Is there evidence of quality adult involvement with the babies?
- Are the carers approachable, warm, friendly, enthusiastic, welcoming and interested?
- Are the babies organized into different age-groups?
- Are the activities geared to each baby's stage of development?
- What opportunities are there for sensory play?
- Where will my baby sleep?
- Is security a high priority?

Babies must not be able to wander out of the room without being noticed. Staff should also be aware of the importance of personal hygiene and follow appropriate procedures (see EYE November 2009). Parents may also ask about staff to baby ratios. The ratio of adults to babies up to two years of age is 1:3.

What else should I expect to find in the nursery?

The good nursery has a regular routine that includes a good balance of play and rest. Activities might include:

- Time for unrestricted exercise and movement.
- Opportunities for exploration and play.
- Quality interaction with a regular carer.
- Music making, singing, rhymes and stories.
- Group and individual activities.
- Meal times, meals, snacks and nap time.

Television should play little or no part in the routine (see EYE February 2010). The best nursery places high value on having fun and giving babies plenty of variety, stimulation and interest. A caring nursery will have put some thought into the amount of time that babies spend in high chairs, container seats or similar restraining devices (See EYE April 2009).

Is the outdoor space safe and designed for baby play?

Facilities will vary considerably from nursery to nursery, but a well maintained outdoor area or garden that has been designed with babies in mind provides opportunities for sensory play and learning. Fresh air and sunshine also promote healthy development and help babies to sleep better at night.

Here are some questions that parents might ask:

- Is there special baby play equipment such as a play house or small slides and strollers?
- Are the babies separated from toddlers and older children to prevent rough play?
- How often are the babies taken outside?
- Are they taken outside in different weathers?
- Is there an area where babies can play under cover?
- Are the babies taken on outings?

If the nursery does not have enough space for an outside play area, regular outings to the park can provide an opportunity for outdoor learning and play.

Good quality care

In a society that encourages parents to work outside the home, good quality care has a crucial role to play in facilitating the healthy emotional development of babies. Babies flourish in all sorts of environments, but the real issue is the quality of care.

Parents need to feel that their baby will be happy, safe and well cared for in the nursery and that they are given plenty of opportunities to learn and develop. If the nursery does not have a friendly feel or the quality of care and learning and developmental opportunities are not there, then parents will look elsewhere.

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